

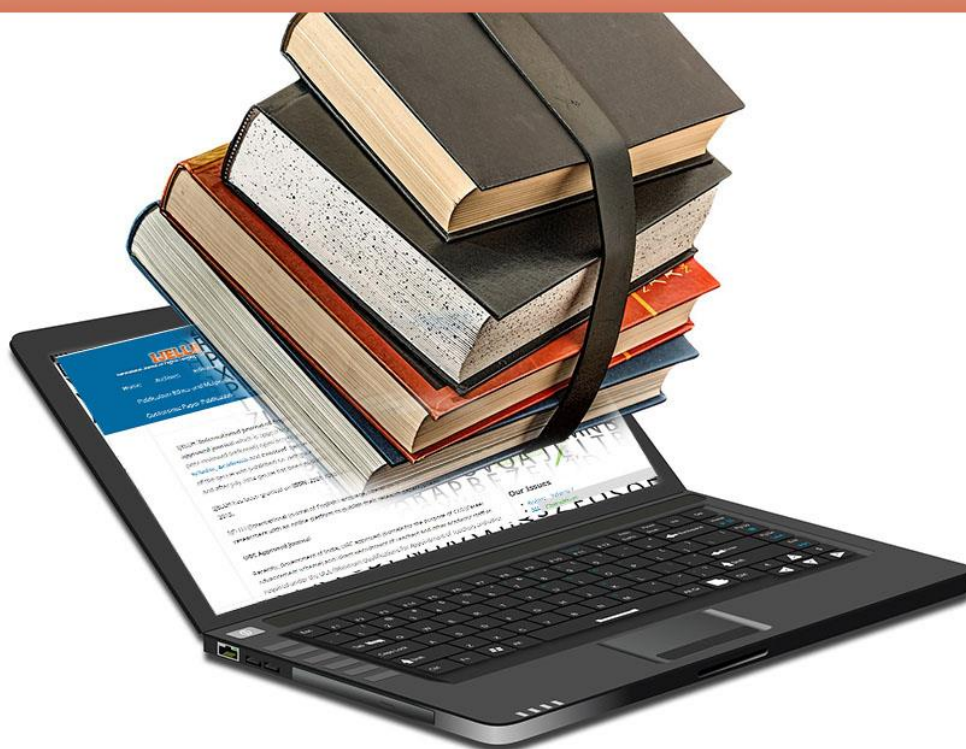
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Refugee Crisis in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

Abstract

The paper "The Trauma of Migration: Refugee Crisis in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*" deals with the theme of Migration as portrayed in the novel where Nadia and Saeed, the protagonists, are forced to migrate from their unnamed native city to Mykonos and from there to London and then to San Francisco. Through these multiple migrations, Mohsin Hamid explores the theme of refugees and natives in the novel to make the readers aware of the sense of rootlessness and uneasiness that people suffer as they try to settle in their adopted country. Some can settle down while others are forced to return to their native place. The novel is an excellent rendition of the theme of the refugee crisis that the world is facing these days and therefore it was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize 2017.

Keywords: Conflict, *Exit West*, Migration, Mohsin Hamid, Refugee Crisis

Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* portrays the political conflicts resulting in mass migration and the crisis caused by the influx of refugees in large numbers. The experience of displacement that the author himself had gone through finds a creative outlet in the novel.

Mohsin Hamid was born in Lahore and at the age of three went to California and from there moved to Sydney and back to Lahore again. The personal experiences of the migration from one land to another in quick succession probably had made the author experience the refugee crisis from a very close perspective and provided him insights about living in countries, which do not always welcome immigrants.

In this context, it is to be understood that migration of human beings from one place to another is nothing new and with the globalization of the world, migration from one nation to another has become the buzz word of the human civilization. But the movement is not always a voluntary activity; often it is a choice that people make as the political context of the nation seems to be so that one is forced to migrate. For example, during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire following World War I, Muslims moved from Balkans to Turkey and Christians the other way. Because of the Anti-Semitic attitudes of Europe, more than four hundred thousand Jews moved to Palestine and numerous Jews to America. The Russian civil war forced millions of Russians to migrate out of the new Soviet Union. Even during the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, thousands of Hindus migrated from newly formed Pakistan to India and Muslims from India to Pakistan. Thus, there are numerous examples where the political and cultural situations forced people to relocate from one nation to another.

In and around 2010, the world witnessed another such gory act of mass migration leading from the civil wars in the Middle East. It is estimated that eleven million men, women and children fled their countries and sought asylum in Europe. A record of more than 5000 migrants drowned, suffocated or froze to death in the Mediterranean Sea in 2016. This wave of migration was probably one of the biggest crises in the recent history of the humankind when mass-migration happened due to the traumatic political situation of a nation. In this context, it is also

to be mentioned that due to the excessive number of refugees, many European countries implemented restrictions including border closure to have control over their economy. In such a situation, Mohsin Hamid begins his novel in an unnamed city, located somewhere in the Middle East.

The refugees are individuals whose basic needs are not met in the country of their origin, and hence they are forced to migrate to other countries in search of security or for the fulfilment of their basic needs. USA for UNCHR, a UN refugee agency, describes a refugee as someone “who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence” and “has a well-founded fear of persecution, war or violence.” Thus, refugees are asylum seekers, who often had a traumatic experience resulting in forced displacement and cannot return to their homeland due to a lingering fear of violence or persecution.

The refugee crisis has grown at an unprecedented scale due to civil wars, state repression, terror and catastrophic climate changes. UNCHR report of 2013 points out that the relevance of studying forced migration or refugee crisis can be established by the fact that in 2012 alone 7.6million people were “newly displaced due to conflict or persecution... an average of 23000 people a day.” Dawn Chatty in his article “Anthropology and Forced Migration” comments: “The twentieth century has been called ‘the century of the refugee’, so it is not surprising that the twenty-first century looks set to become a ‘century of displacement and dispossession’.” (75) Alexandra Alter, in her review, describes the novel as foreshowing an impending global crisis:

The novel- which fuses magical realism with a harrowing vivid story of global migration and displacement- feels ominously relevant The world seems to be veering towards the upheaval and entrenched polarization that Mr. Hamid envisioned in the novel. (Alter)

In the novel, Saeed and Nadia, in an unknown middle-eastern city, meet in an evening class on corporate identity and product branding and take notice of each other. Whereas, Nadia is open-minded, enjoys music and psychedelic mushrooms, and lives in her rented apartment by herself; Saeed is very traditional and lives with his parents. He is fascinated by Nadia's independent way of life, and they form a relationship which the novel explores in detail amidst the atmosphere of growing militancy and the refugee crisis. Their country was experiencing a civil war, and there was an influx of refugees from war-torn areas into the city. Nadia and Saeed found that the refugees had occupied many open places in their city. They were "pitching tents in the green belts between roads, erecting lean-tos next to the boundary wall of houses, sleeping rough on pavements and in the margins of streets". (23) They were trying to provide shelter to their families "under a sheet of plastic propped up with branches and a few chipped bricks." (23) Many of them were stunned by the changes in their fortunes, while others looked at the city with mixed emotions which looked like "anger or surprise, or supplication or envy." The people of the city found their presence a disruption in their normal rhythm of life. "Saeed and Nadia had to be careful when making turns not to run over an outstretched arm or leg." (23)

Nadia does not believe in God or engages in worship. She wears traditional black robes "so men don't fuck with [her]" (16). On the other hand, Saeed lives a very traditional life and he often goes to pray. In spite of the difference in their temperaments, they start craving for each other's company and Saeed makes secret visits to Nadia's apartments. As they see each other, their lives get complicated as the militants enter and take over the city. Nadia's cousin, a brilliant doctor, who lived abroad but was visiting his parents, is blown into pieces, along with eighty-five others, by a truck bomb. The ponytail man, who used to supply Nadia psychedelic mushrooms, is beheaded by the militants and his headless body is "strung up by one ankle from

an electricity pylon.” (38) The militants started occupying localities, which called for retaliatory fore and airstrikes by the government security forces. Soon, “one day the signal to every mobile phone in the city simply vanished, turned off as if by flipping a switch” (55) and the mobile communication between Saeed and Nadia comes to an end. Curfew is also set in the town after sunset and still amidst this Nadia and Saeed can meet each other. Soon both Saeed and Nadia lost their jobs as their employers abandoned their businesses and employees, unable to sustain them in such dangerous times.

As the fighting intensified, windows became a security risk as they “could not stop even the most flagging round of ammunition: any spot indoors with a view of the outside was potentially a spot potentially in the crossfire.” (68) Besides a blast could shatter a window pane into shards of flying glass and many people bled after being lacerated by them.

The most traumatic blow for the family came when Saeed’s mother was killed by a stray high-calibre round of stray bullet, which her through the windscreen of the family car, while she was driving it. Nadia moved to Saeed’s apartment for offering condolences and comfort but stayed there for her own security and to help Saeed and his father . The militants hold over their locality resulted in massive aerial bombing, and public executions became everyday occurrences. Steeping out, one was confronted by the revolting sights of bodies hanging from streetlamps and billboards, which kept hanging till the “odour became almost unbearable.” (83) Many people were killed just because they belonged to other sects or militants considered them as threats. Saeed’s father was appalled by barbaric low, to which the society had plunged when he found children playing football with a severed human head. The destruction of electricity infrastructure led to the failure of water supply as well, and people had to squat over the trenches to relieve themselves.

The worsening of the situation led people to consider the option of emigrating to safer foreign lands. Most of the people wanted to send their children to secure places. They were ready to send them to far off nations, without a hope of seeing them ever again, to ensure their safe future. They were prepared to embrace struggles and uncertain future in a foreign land than face certain harm in their own country. Shakenov, describes refugees as the persons “whose basic needs are unprotected by the country of origin, who have no remaining recourse than to seek international restoration of their needs.” (Gibney) Many people in Saeed’s and Nadia’s country had lost hope of a secure future in their country of origin and looked desperately at emigration as their only chance of survival.

Hamid uses magic realism and introduces magical doors in the novel. There are talks in the town that “doors” are opening and one can go through them and leave the city for good. In the era of transnational networks, international travel and modern means of communication, there are organized networks that transport asylum seekers from one part of the world to the other. Hamid assumes that people can escape national boundaries and can smuggle themselves clandestinely to safer or better countries. “The doors provide an escape, but they also have a catch; you cannot be certain where each door will lead, or if you’ll be able to find the next exit.” (Milo) The governments are aware of the existence of these doors, yet they cannot stop or regulate them. The existence of these doors serves an important narrative function in the novel. “These mysterious portals- which the authorities are racing to discover and block off- remove much of the drama of the protagonists’ flight west, away from a war-torn homeland; there are no long, arduous journeys across land and sea here.” (Salleh)

Saeed and Nadia plan to leave their native place and find security and opportunity in a foreign land. Saeed’s father does not agree to leave the city. He has many memories and does

not wish to move, in his last days, away from the city, where his wife and ancestors are buried. Besides he thought that in his old age he would be a liability for Saeed and might even reduce his chances of survival. He persuades his son to leave him and move on. Both Saeed and Nadia were filled with the guilt of abandoning the old man. Hamid comments, “that is the way of things, for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those whom we leave behind.” (94) Thus, Hamid establishes that refugees carry within them the guilt of abandoning their less fortunate friends and family members, as they undertook their perilous journey towards more secure habitations.

They hire an agent, who organizes their trip to a door, located in a dentist’s clinic. They go through the “door” and end up in Mykonos, a Greek island. When Saeed and Nadia arrived first in Mykonos, they realised that they are in a beachside international refugee camp which was talked about as a “pretty safe” (101) place compared to their native place. The refugee camp had “hundreds of tents and lean-tos and people of many colours and hues...speaking in a cacophony that was the languages of the world.” (100) Saeed and Nadia located a cluster of their countrymen, who provided them with some necessary information about the place. Then the couple bought some basic needs like a blanket, a backpack, a foldable tent and electric power bank. It is in Mykonos they were exposed to the phenomenon of largescale migration:

Nadia and Saeed sat next to each other and caught up on the news, the tumult in the world, the state of their country, the various routes and destinations migrants were taking and recommending to each other, the tricks one could gainfully employ, the dangers one needed at all costs to avoid. (103)

In Mykonos, their relationship starts changing as from being affectionate to each other they start becoming protective to each other – probably the “alien” environment has such an

effect on their psychology. They face many hardships. Their funds started dwindling, and they were forced to reduce their consumption of food and drink. They were duped by an acquaintance of Saeed, who claimed to be a “people smuggler”, who “had helped people escape their city, and was doing the same thing here because he knew all ins and outs.” (109). They found the camps as “mousetraps” (111), where people could do nothing but passively watch their resources getting exhausted. They felt quite insecure but could not return to their city, for it was under militants’ control and no one “who was known to have fled their rule was allowed to live.” (110) Mohsin Hamid, in an interview to Sune Engles Rasmussen, says that the purpose of a refugee camp is to “mete out on the migrants a level of horror that counterbalances the horror facing them where they’re from, so they don’t come anymore.” (Rasmussen) In the camp, they faced the daily humiliation of abject poverty, depending for their survival, on the charity done by volunteer organisations, philanthropists and humanitarian agencies. Mohsin Hamid, in an interview by James Yeh, comments:

A big chunk of the novel is surviving without work. And I think when work is taken from people, life becomes very difficult. You imagine refugees in a refugee camp, and you think of many hardships they undergo, but one of the fundamental hardship is like in a prison- there is no work. (Yeh)

They came across a female volunteer, who helped Nadia by safely taking her and Saeed to a door, which leads them to London. In London, Nadia and Saeed found themselves in a large abandoned building, which was teeming with refugees from different conflict-stricken parts of the world. The refugees consisted of all age groups, from infants to elderly, and were very anxious as they were trying to adjust to realities of their lives in this new place. The law enforcement agencies treated them as illegal intruders and were apprehensive about their

presence. This potential conflict escalated the tension in the environment:

The housekeeper screamed as she unlocked the front door, and police arrived quickly after, two men in old-fashioned black hats.... Soon there was a vanload more of them, in full riot gear, and then a car with two more who wore white shirts and black vests and were armed with what appeared to be sub-machine guns, and on their black vests was the word POLICE in white letters but these two looked to Saeed and Nadia like soldiers. (124)

They struggle to start living life but being refugees, they are faced with discrimination at every step. They, unable to earn are forced to forage to meet their need for food. Hamid draws the picture of how there are two Londons – Dark London and Light London. Whereas in the Dark London, refugees stay and therefore electricity can be cut off from there so that the worthier Light London can be illuminated. However, Nadia and Saeed learnt that “in London, there were parts as bright as ever, brighter than any place [they] have seen before [...] and in contrast the city’s dark swathes seemed darker” (142). Another aspect that Hamid portrays that during their life in London, the relationship between Saeed and Nadia starts altering. The independent-minded Nadia starts feeling more and more comfortable in the new place. She “acquired a bit of special status” with Nigerians, who formed the largest group of refugees in her London building. She was the only non-Nigerian member in their council meetings, which engaged in making “decisions on room disputes or claims of theft or unneighbourly behaviour, and also on relations with other houses on the street.” (145) She appreciates newness and wishes to adapt herself to new situations. Saeed, on the other hand, starts reminiscing about his home town, and find his comfort in living with the coreligionist refugees from his own country. They share the same predicament, speak the same language and are united in their common struggle to find a foothold in the land, they have entered as illegal migrants. They comfort each other

through their prayers and draw strength from their shared beliefs and feel secure in each other's company. Anu Kumar comments: "Religion now provides comfort to Saeed in a new land. When he prayed, he felt an invisible, inviolable communion, with his parents, whom he lost in the unnamed city of the past. It is something he finds hard to share with Nadia." (Kumar)

The refugees have to fight for their survival continually. The stories of migrants arriving in large numbers and flooding various London localities fill the native Londoners with fear. Saeed and Nadia find their street attacked by a violent nativist mob, in which some were armed with iron bars and knives. "Nadia's eye was bruised and would soon swell shut, and Saeed's lip was split and kept bleeding down his chin and onto his jacket." (131) The local population is divided between the "nativists advocating 'wholesale slaughter' of refugees to 'reclaim Britain for Britain' and volunteers delivering food and medicines to new arrivals." (Bilal) Many refugees also started carrying knives and firearms for their protection in this hostile environment. After a period of isolation and repression, the government finally acknowledged their presence and provided them with some basic facilities required by human beings to exist. Saeed, a simple-hearted idealist, fails to understand the reasons for the hostility of the frightened Londoners who either attack or show hatred through demonstrations:

'I can understand it' [Nadia] said. 'Imagine if you lived here. And millions of people from all over the world suddenly arrived.' 'Millions arrived in our country,' Saeed replied. 'When there were wars nearby.' 'That was different. Our country was poor. We didn't feel we had as much to lose'. (162)

In spite of the opposition that refugees faced from the natives, there were many natives with humanitarian sympathies, who extended care and support to the helpless refugees. Some people, from the same native communities, stood for the security, rights and dignity of the

refugees. When a young woman in Vienna learned about the gathering of a nativist mob planning to attack the asylum-seeking migrants, she “planned to join a human cordon to separate the two sides, or rather to shield the migrants from the anti-migrants.” (104-105) She wore on her overcoat a peace badge and a migrant compassion badge. She faced the hostile attitude of the angry crowd towards her, yet she remained firm in her resolve to work for the security of the migrants. In Mykonos, Nadia and Saeed were helped by a local teenage girl, a volunteer with a kind disposition, who cleaned and dressed Nadia’s wound and provided friendship and care to the couple. She also helped the couple to find a door, which enables them to leave Mykonos for London. In London too, in the midst of all the ugly confrontations, “there were volunteers delivering food and medicine to the area, and aid agencies at work, and the government had not banned them from operating.” (135) Hamid makes it clear that anti-migrant nativist discourse is not the only discourse in refugee-receiving countries for numerous individuals make individual and collective efforts to alleviate the suffering of the refugees and assist them in their goal to survive.

And then they find another door which leads them to the city of Marin near San Francisco. As a place, Marin is poor, but it is more peaceful as it “was less violent than most of the places its residents had fled [...]” (193). Hamid describes the place as containing “almost no natives” (196), as the natives had either been exterminated or were utterly marginalised. The people who considered themselves as natives were mostly white skinned people of British origin. But by this time, the differences between Nadia and Saeed had started growing wider and wider, and they decide to live lives separately. Saeed meets a native preacher’s daughter and decides to marry her and Nadia starts living alone once again and as day’s progress they lose contact between each other.

The plot of the novel tells that the novel is about the ongoing migration crisis in the whole of the world and that is dealt with a magic realist technique of the metaphor of “doors” which magically shifts Nadia and Saeed to different locations in the novel. Hamid does not in the novel describes the journey through these doors in detail, but merely shows that these doors have some kind of magical quality in them to shift the migrants from one nation to another. These “doors” thus become the metaphor for hope and freedom for the traumatised lot like Nadia and Saeed who uses these doors to settle in the place where they can find relative “peace.” Hamid highlights the changing perception of national boundaries in an increasingly globalized world, by referring to the change in people’s perception of the doors in moments of crisis: “A normal door, they said, could become a special door, and it could happen without warning, to any door at all [and] most people began to gaze at their own doors a little differently nonetheless.” (70).

The chilling details of the gruelling journeys one undertakes to enter a host country as a refugee is consciously avoided through the use of magical realism in the form of doors. It helps the author to focus on the hardships faced by the refugees in settling down in the host country as they face dislocations at multiple levels- political, cultural as well as psychological. Different people adapt to the situations in different ways – whereas Saeed could never accept that fact that he has left his home country and therefore aspires to return and eventually returns to his country; Nadia settles down in the adopted country.

Thus, Mohsin Hamid’s project in the novel seems to debate on the situation of the refugees and migration, and he does that brilliantly through the portrayal of two characters – Saeed and Nadia and their relationship which changes as they travel from the East to the West. But apart from these two characters, Hamid also shows many faceless refugees in the novel. In Mykonos, Saeed and Nadia saw skin colours “within a band of brown that ranges from dark

chocolate to milky tea” and they spoke, “a cacophony that was the languages of the world, what one might hear if one were a communications satellite” (100). Thus, the diversity of the migrants, who have moved in as refugees, are portrayed in Mykonos. When we arrive at London along with the protagonists, we see that these refugees are given a nationality as people from Nigeria, Somalia, Myanmar and Thailand (120) are presented in the ghettos of London. When we reach the far West, in the town of Marin, we see that there are no natives there, but only refugees. Thus, as we move from the East to the West in the course of the narrative of the novel, we see that one encounters more and more refugees and ultimately in Marin, there are no one else but refugees or migrants.

Saeed’s feelings of loss, following his experience of dislocation, point out that through people migrate and become refugees for the sake of their security, yet there remains an intense longing for their homeland in their hearts. When one looks at the diasporic community all over the world one can see this characteristic in a much clearer way. The people of the diasporic community share a longing for the centre, whether they are forcibly dispersed or they have voluntarily moved. Saeed feels such longing in the novel as he always shows a deep resentment towards settling down in the West and a certain kind of jitteriness and anxiety for abandoning his home, family and friends. He feels that “when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind” (94). In Frantz Fanon’s view, the diasporic community is a community of “individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless.” (176) In such a view, the diaspora is a ‘metaphoric designation’ for many groups of people such as expatriates, refugees, exiles, immigrants and people like them who have moved physically from the country of their origin to a different place for various reasons. Whereas Nadia in the novel can deal with this rootlessness to some extent and therefore is at peace with herself in the Western world, Saeed had to come back to his native place as he finds that it is the only place where he can be

at peace with himself. So, at the end of the novel, in the last chapter which happens to be fifty years after the time of the rest of the narrative of the novel, we find Saeed to be in his native place and Nadia coming back to her native place as a visitor after fifty years, and they meet.

Hamid makes migration as the universal condition of humanity in a fast-changing world. “We are all migrants through time.” (209) Hamid illustrates it by giving an example of an old woman, in the town of Palo Alto, who never moved out of her town, but her university educated grand-daughter and rapid changes in her town made her feel that she too had migrated, that everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives, because we can’t help it.”(209) Migration involves a deep sense of loss, but it is this sense loss, which “unites humanity” and brings to fore “the temporary nature of our being-ness”. It has the potential to make us more compassionate by creating solidarity on the basis of “our shared sorrows”. (202)

The novel ends with an interesting note when Saeed tells Nadia that he will someday take Nadia to his favourite sights in the deserts of Chile, when they both “rose and embraced and parted and did not know, then, if that evening would ever come.” (229). The ending of the narrative in such a fashion only suggests that the author envisions a world, in future, where people will travel quickly and migration will become the order of the day, leading to a generation of highly mobile individuals, who would not be bound by a particular geography. “All over the world people were slipping away from where they had been, from once fertile plains cracking with dryness, from seaside villages gasping beneath tidal surges and from overcrowded cities and murderous battlefields...”(211) Various kinds of natural and human-made catastrophes, throughout the world would continue to create refugees and cause mass migration, and sovereign national governments, in spite of their best efforts at border control, would not be able to stop it. At last, it is significant to look at the origin of the term ‘nation’

which comes the word “nasci” which literally means ‘a sense of belonging.’ In the context of migrants or the refugees, it is the sense of “belonging” to a particular place, and a longing at being displaced from that place is the prime cause of anxiety of the individual as well as the community. Hamid calls for a widening our sympathies and understanding of the fact that migrants are not a liability for a country or a city, but as in the case of Marin, they add to its richness, diversity and prosperity. Hamid says that instead of bringing apocalypse, the migrants brought forth a “great creative flowering in the region.” (216) He presents it as a hope to the world, which is bound to witness large scale migration due to disasters caused by climate changes, natural catastrophes and political conflicts.

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